

Provocative Idea:

Meaningful Academic Work as Praxis in Emergence

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Abstract

The managerial form of university governance has changed the conditions of academic work in many countries. While some academics consider this a welcome development, others experience it as a threat to their autonomy and to the meaningfulness of their work. This essay suggests a stance in response to the current conditions that should serve especially the latter group of academics. The claim is that by approaching academic work as a potential praxis in emergence, it is possible to appreciate local, autonomous activity in renewing academic work. Even if such efforts remain difficult, dispersed in space, discontinuous in time, and incomplete, they may provide a sense of direction and keep up hope. The conception of praxis is a way of articulating the mission of such efforts; simultaneously, it is also a way of defining an epistemic object for research on academic work.

Keywords: academic work; higher education research; theories of practice; praxis

Suggested Citation: Räsänen, K. (2008). Meaningful academic work as praxis in emergence.

Journal of Research Practice, 4(1), Article P1. Retrieved [date of access], from

<http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/78/102>

1. Introduction

The university can be a site for meaningful work. Academic work can be autonomous, inherently rewarding, and socially significant. Yet, many academics seem to share the experience that they are losing control over their work. They complain that their work agenda becomes increasingly fragmented and the purpose of the various activities gets blurred. They are concerned for the ever changing performance indicators and standards of “excellence” imposed on them by university administrators and “managers.” As one of those academics who share these

experiences, I wrote this article to suggest a stance towards these worries in higher education.

I have worked in a Finnish business school since 1980. Currently the school's management expects that I publish regularly in the "top journals," gain an international reputation as a key academic of my field, attract significant amounts of funding from public and private sources, teach more courses than previously in each academic year and in a way that pleases Finnish and "international" students, supervise world-class dissertations, serve the school's business partners in various ways, remake myself into a nationally respected and influential figure, keep up my and the school's brand in media, and contribute actively to the school's governance in various bodies and taskforces, among other things. According to the official vision, the school will be a world-class, research university by the year 2020, which is quite different from the teaching centred, semiperipheral business university that employed me in 1980. Making research an accepted part of work took a lot of effort from many of us over the years, and now we are again deemed incompetent to our jobs--if we do not prove otherwise during the next 5-year period. Even if I mentally accepted the fact that I will never fulfil the expectations on all of the indicators, my work is still disturbed by the managerial measures taken to "induce" or force correct conduct from me and my colleagues. What I--an ordinary academic--consider important and valuable in academic work is considered irrelevant. Especially those who are only "mediocre" according to the indicators should keep silent--whatever they might think about the indicators and other forms of managerial control.

In this political and emotional landscape, striking a balance between hope and despair is central (Harris, 2005; Mäntylä, 2007). One cannot sustain motivation to keep working, if one does not see glimpses of hope amongst the many reasons for despair. Therefore I try to sketch in this article a vocabulary with which one can speak about meaningful academic work. This vocabulary suggests an alternative to the managerial rhetoric that dominates local conversations and debates in Helsinki and in many other European universities.

If one wants to develop a reflexive understanding of academic work, a natural place to turn is higher education research. If anybody can, higher education researchers should be able to understand what is going on in universities. In the next section I will outline how researchers in this field have approached the problematic situation illustrated above. The field is divided into two main camps: Some believe that managerial forms of governance will improve universities' capacities to measure up to modern, economic realities, whereas others criticise the neo-liberal policies and keep laying claim to their destructive consequences. In my view, neither of these stances provides a base for hope, because they either celebrate the imposition of an externally determined order on academics or reactively concentrate on resisting the new order on account of its damaging consequences. These stances do not leave intellectual and emotional space for local, autonomous efforts at improving academic work and its conditions. In order to sustain hope, academics need new, alternative frames of interpretation or *narratives*. They should express stances that support local action instead of making us mere victims of uncontrollable

forces or only long for the good old times.

The article reports results from one research group's effort to develop an alternative, constructive, and participatory approach to higher education research. In this effort we have utilised the so-called *theories of practice* (for overviews, see Chaiklin, 1993; Kemmis, in press; Nicolini, Gherardi, & Yanow, 2003; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2001). We suggest that the daily doings and sayings in academia can be fruitfully understood as *practical activity*, in and from which academics may be able to construct a *praxis*, at least in some specific cases and local circumstances. By praxis we mean collective activity that combines a moral purpose with political commitment and tactical skilfulness. I argue that this conception of academic work aids in articulating what might be--a potential vision--and, thereby, offers a positive mission for local efforts at renewal. I draw support for this view from the margins of higher education literature and from our local experiences.

The purpose of this article is to help inform and provoke discussion on alternative stances to the current changes in universities. Those who share the experiences of fragmentation and decreased autonomy may ask exactly what it is that academics can do about them by drawing on the conception of academic praxis. Those who are happy with the current developments or see no hope in local activity may have good arguments against the vision of academic praxis. I try to suggest points of departure for both these lines of response.

2. Engaging Debates in Higher Education Research

I have been reading higher education (HE) studies from a special angle. My background is in organization studies, and I became seriously interested in HE studies only in the mid 1990s. The interest stemmed from efforts to change teaching and learning practices. Working with a group of colleagues, I learned to teach differently and we gradually expanded our focus to embrace other academic practices: practices of research, external service, and self-governance. This reorientation made us wonder if anybody has written about similar developments in other universities. We noticed soon that there are thousands of HE researchers who are researching the work of academia. The abundant literature offered me resources for elaborating and reflecting on our ideals and practices. I did not so much search for "proven facts" or descriptions of educational systems as stances that would be encouraging and supportive of autonomous development work. To us, autonomous development work meant collective efforts that were not ordered by managers or dictated by politicians. It was work that was driven by what academics themselves considered an improvement for the better in local circumstances and in respect to local traditions. Thus, I had a practical need for research-based knowledge, which I used in the spirit of participatory research--as a participant in the world being studied.

At first, reading HE literature was extremely rewarding. Gradually we started to approach the researcher circles with our own writings and became involved in the field. However, we came to notice a disappointing feature in the literature. It was polarized into two camps, neither of which

served our immediate interests. Possibly due to the recent political history of the prominent English-speaking countries, the researchers were considering us, ordinary academics, either as “implementation problems” that delay the realization of the neo-liberal policies in the university sector or as victims of dangerous policies and in need of societal, political mobilization. The writing of the latter camp at least spoke to my experiences by describing the weakening working conditions in academia and by pointing out that *managerialism* (or “New Public Management”) was the ideology behind the immediate measures that affected my work (see, e.g., Blackmore & Sachs, 2000; Dearlove, 1998; Deem, 1998; Parker & Jary, 1995; Zipin & Brennan, 2003). Critical scholars in the field of management studies have described similar phenomena in other work organizations.

To put it simply, the ideology of managerialism is based on the belief that the world becomes better if it is managed better. This better world is more efficient in economic terms. As an ideology of an alleged profession it justifies the status of managers as those who are the most competent in allocating and controlling work and resources. Managerial “tools” and styles may change, from Taylorism to “softer,” cultural forms of control and sophisticated versions of “change management” and “innovation management,” but it is the managers who are supposed to know and take the initiative. Employees’ consequent “resistance to change” has to be dealt with by proper means--one of the means is to make the employees “participate” in changes that concern their own work.

The implications of managerialism in the university context have been aptly documented by the higher education researchers who want to problematize this ideology. A new breed, the university manager was to take over the governing role from academic leaders and representatives. Management systems were to be imported from the private sector. Each academic was to be made accountable in respect to numerical indicators. Academics were there to implement “strategies” chosen by the managers. The academics were to be renamed a “human resource” that the managers would use instrumentally in securing the competitiveness and excellence of the university in global educational and research markets. All this promised that recalcitrant academics cannot any more prevent positive changes, and the public costs of the sector can be cut down. If this was the basic idea, then the actual developments and their speed varied across countries and universities. However, only some academics welcomed this political strategy and its implementation measures, whereas many others felt increasingly alienated from their work. A key theme in critical HE research has been to document the diverse responses to the new policies and managerial forms of control (Chandler, Barry, & Clark, 2002; Churchman, 2004; Prichard & Willmott, 1997).

The critical account is convincing and even therapeutic for those who have suffered under the new policies. I found it comforting to know that I am not alone with my doubts and points of critique. However, this kind of critique is not enough for people like me who still want to do something about our own practices and working conditions. We had managed to renew local

practices to some extent and it did not feel right to start waiting for a change in policy without any indication of collective, political mobilization towards that end. The critical writers were so deeply engaged in proving the weaknesses of their enemy that the meanings of academic work were expressed only in negation, as if good work in academia is merely opposite to what the current policies and managerial rhetoric suggest. Even if the rulers and policies changed, we would still face the issue of specifying what we would seek to do, that would constitute good academic work in current conditions.

All approaches to academic work need to deal with a crucial complication. What we and many others call “academic work” consists of a bundle of activities (Kalleberg, 2000). It is quite usual that an ordinary academic working in a discipline-based unit takes part in several of the following activities: research, education, external services, public discussion (or popularization), and the governance of these activities. Can such multi-functional work ever appear as meaningful, coherent, integrated, and controlled to the practitioner? Can any conceptual framework make this multitude a reasonable object of research or development? It was against this background that we found it valuable to turn to the theories of practice.

3. A Possible Mission: Academic Praxis in Emergence

The managerial vocabulary and imagination turns academic work into a technocratic exercise and an academic into an instrumentally oriented operator. An alternative approach has to appreciate the nature of academic work as a politically informed and morally sensitive activity. An extended reading of the practice-based literature brought me back to an old concept, namely *praxis*. This concept serves well in highlighting the less instrumental and technocratic dimensions of academic work, especially after it is reinterpreted to fit into this context. I had previously used a related concept, “logics of action,” in researching managerial work (Eriksson & Räsänen, 1997; Meriläinen, Räsänen, & Lovio, 1995; cf. Bourdieu, 1990), but revisions to the old ideas were now needed: we know much more about academic work than we can know about managerial work. Our knowledge is also qualitatively different, with significant “experiential,” “presentational,” and “practical” elements in addition to research-based propositions (Reason, 1999).

The concept of praxis aids in the recognition of multiple dimensions in *practical activity*--or practice, to use a more usual expression. However, any practical activity cannot be considered a form of praxis. Praxis refers to activity that fulfils certain criteria. This statement requires further elaboration below. Unfortunately, the distinctions between different terms are difficult to express in English. This language has many uses for the single word *practice*, but I use the term here in a specific and limited way.

A large part of the practice-based literature focuses on detailed studies of single *practices*. In academia, examples could be practices of publishing, thesis supervision, or laboratory work. We have found it more promising, for our purpose, to focus especially on practice-theoretical

perspectives that address broader forms of social activity. In fact, such conceptions are available in lines of thinking that predate the recent “practice turn” (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001). The idea of praxis is old and much used, especially in pragmatist philosophy and Marxist social theory, even though these older traditions have not been prominent in the recent discussions (see Miettinen, in press; Nicolini, Gherardi, & Yanow, 2003). Authors often use terms like *social practice* or *cultural practice* when they are drawing on this idea, which causes terminological complications.

Among the current-day scholars, the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has explicitly drawn on these older, Aristotelian lines of thought. His way of using the term *social practice* seems to come close to our interests, in spite of some problematic aspects in his thinking. His often-cited definition of social practice as a form of life emphasizes its “internal goods” as well as “virtues” needed in pursuing them (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 175). He makes practical activity a moral issue (cf. Thévenot, 2001, p. 59). In rehearsing a practice, practitioners focus their efforts on its internal goods, and keep a critical distance from the “external goods” served by the “institution” that is needed to support the practice. Moreover, the internal goods of a specific practice are recognizable only to those practitioners who are wedded to it and its own associated “standards of excellence.” That is, only the practitioners themselves know what is good or bad in their own work. As David Hansen (1998) says, “the moral is in the practice.”

In the case of academic work, MacIntyre’s view is easy to translate (cf. Nixon, 2003, 2004). Academic professionals should know best what are the internal goods and virtues in academic work. Consequently, those who act on behalf of the university as an institution should respect the practitioners’ autonomy in this respect. And *vice versa*, academics should defend their autonomy against the interests that prioritize such external goods as money, status, and reputation. I regard this as a promising and comforting perspective on academic work.

However, MacIntyre’s conception of practice needs some elaboration. First, it is too restrictive to focus only on the moral side of academic work--as practical activity, our work involves much more than mere moral motives and justifications. What dimensions do we need to take into account when we are trying to articulate or identify a particular form of practical activity? Second, when can we say that somebody is rehearsing praxis and not merely acting practically?

In addition to these two questions, it is necessary to note that MacIntyre’s examples of social practice work on a rather large scale: his writing concerns the time span of a few thousand years. If history or biology is a practice for him, it is more relevant for our purposes to consider diverse forms of practice within an academic discipline and in various local contexts. For instance, instead of looking at organization studies as a practice, it is more interesting to look for diverse ways in which organization researchers do academic work and understand their professional practice in different business schools (and other institutional settings).

Our group is working with a three-dimensional conception of practical activity. This conception draws together various uses of the concept *praxis*. While the moral perspective sets high demands for claims on rehearsing practice, a more permissive and less-exclusive view may be more useful in studying academic work. Ordinary work can be interesting as practical activity, too, and not only in cases of an established *praxis*. And, academic work is not only concerned with moral issues; the academic encounters other issues that are equally crucial. Accordingly, we argue that accounts of a practical activity, by its participants and possibly by knowledgeable outsiders, can be given or received from the following three stances (Korpiaho, Päiviö, & Räsänen, 2007; Räsänen, in press; Räsänen, Korpiaho, Herbert, Mäntylä, & Päiviö, 2005):

- (a) Tactical stance: *How to do this?*
- (b) Political stance: *What to accomplish and achieve in this?*
- (c) Moral stance: *Why to aim at these goals and in this way?*

Accounting for one's action is an inherent element of professional practice (e.g., Garfinkel, 1967, p. vii; Lynch, 1993, p. 1), even if a practitioner does not necessarily narrate it in terms of questions and answers. Accounts also make a practical activity accessible to and discussable with an outsider. By paying attention to the three types of issue (i.e. how, what, and why) crystallizing each stance, we aim to approach practical activity from a broad and inclusive perspective.

We suggest that the issues capture different basic stances to an activity, different modes of operating in it and interpreting it. For example, in a meeting of a university department some participants may talk about a proposal in a tactical (or technical) sense, focusing on how to implement it. Some others may raise doubts about its political implications, focusing on what is to be accomplished or caused by its implementation. Still others may consider the proposal dubious for moral reasons, asking for its moral justifications. Members from each these groups of people are likely to give different interpretations of what happened in the meeting, and the differences in their stances may be based on how they approach their work in general. Each of them may be able to switch between stances, but within the limits set by their competence and social position.

The three-stance view allows for the discussion of the relationships between the various practical issues and of the situations in which a practitioner comes to recognize and raise them. A series of speculations on "situated learning" may clarify the basic point (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1993): When a novice enters a new activity (e.g., research) for the first time it is likely that the how-question is most urgent and at the centre of attention. One has to first and foremost act in a given timeframe. More complicated reflection may be beyond practical capacity and even socially impossible. Once the practitioner has learned to perform the activity relatively well (e.g., after a number of projects), she or he may be able to meet and raise the question of what could and should be accomplished and achieved in this particular (set of) practice(s), and in relation to

other practices. Finally, raising moral issues, especially publicly, requires thorough understanding of the activity field and its politics, that is, by whom and how the goals are being determined. Problematizing the morals of an activity (like local research practices) can be done only from a relatively strong position. And, even if it can be done, there are no guarantees that it is possible to find congruent answers to the questions of how, what, and why. It is more likely that the practitioner's tactical, political, and moral accounts remain at least partly disconnected, and a practitioner switches between them more or less fluently.

However, the schematic presentation should not be taken too literally. One should not assume a developmental pathway from tactical, via political, to moral action. It may well be so that in some activities practitioners are confined to a tactical mode and stance, especially when the space is "owned" and controlled by others (see de Certeau, 1984, on tactical vs. strategic conduct). Equally, moral conversations may be impossible in many circumstances, for instance, due to a strict managerial regime that dampens any attempts at critical reflection or, more generally, due to the nature of the "game" (Bourdieu, 1990). In fact, writers on social practice seem to differ as regards the priority that they give to tactical (de Certeau), political (Bourdieu), and moral (MacIntyre) dimensions of practice (Räsänen, in press).

Now, with the foregoing elaborations, we can come back to the question of when a collective is rehearsing a form of praxis. Using this terminology, practical activity becomes a praxis once practitioners can articulate and negotiate (relatively) coherent answers to all three questions, and actually work according to their ideals. Their tactics, politics, and morals support and are aligned with each other. However, authenticity of the practitioner's accounts is a question of relative judgment. It is not sensible to expect any human activity to be free from hypocrisy or to be totally consistent. At best, actors may have a set of clear and convincing ideals and be able to realize them to a substantial degree, at least for a limited period. When required, they can switch positions in their practical reasoning in a credible way (between tactical, political, and moral stances), and hence deal effectively with any contradictions inherent in their praxis.

In these terms, the successful construction of academic praxis may be rare. Nevertheless, it may be possible. By outlining this conception of praxis we have defined a new epistemic object for our research efforts. Simultaneously, we suggest a mission for our local renewal efforts: We are about to develop a specific, local praxis. We can talk about something that does not exist. In this conception, we are both objects and subjects.

Regarding research in academic work, the conception directs attention to the *emergence* of academic praxis (cf. on emergence, Czarniawska, 2004; Pickering, 1993). While we may mostly be involved in practical activity, we may look at these everyday endeavors with a sensitivity to the possibility that some academics may be in the process of trying to establish a praxis of their own. Even if most of these projects fail, it is still important to allow for the possibility that academics are searching for a big picture, a coherent story to live by, and this search is the key to

understanding their movements, aspirations, and sentiments.

A terminological summary is needed, because the term *practice* has been put to various uses in the relevant literature. We use three related terms in specific ways: practical activity, practice(s), and praxis. Practical activity (in Finnish *käytännöllinen toiminta*,) refers to any social, embodied activity--doing academic work in whatever way is practical activity in this sense. Practical activity involves participation in a set of specific practices (*käytänne*). In some special cases practical activity may evolve into a praxis (*praksis* or *praktiikka*), that is, into a form of academic work as a purposeful bundle of practices.

Certain academic practices (e.g., specific research or teaching practices) can be repeated independently of their purpose in any particular praxis, due to practitioners who take them for granted in their practical activity. However, each specific praxis has its own understanding of, and way of carrying out, particular practices. For instance, pursuing a praxis may provide a specific moral purpose, political goals, and tactical means to teaching and learning practices, and to their relationships to the other academic practices (in research, service, and governance). In this sense a praxis is the big picture, a source of meaning (*tarkoitus*) that leads to participation in some (and avoidance of other) practices.

The view on academic work developed here intends to be sensitive to diversity in the forms of academic work, and to the local conditions of work. Sometimes it is demanding enough to know how to carry out a given set of tasks; in some other circumstances it is brave enough to start asking what to do and why--without ever reaching satisfactory answers. Therefore, we need to be able to study practical activity and potential forms of praxis in emergence, and try to avoid a moralist stance regarding what other academics are doing. In this way, we can hopefully craft accounts of academic work that take seriously ordinary academics and their projects. In this task, the three questions of how, what, and why offer a link between prereflective knowing in practice and distanced theorizing on the part of outsiders. In other words, the questions support reflection for two different purposes (Korpiaho, Päiviö, & Räsänen, 2007; cf. Gherardi & Nicolini, 2001, pp. 51-53): the questions help practitioners in reflecting upon their own practical activity, while also making a practical activity easier for outsiders to discuss and describe.

By using the expression *ordinary academic* I want to leave space for the possibility that even less-celebrated academics working in multifunctional basic units can be in the process of creating new forms of work. It is logically impossible that all academics would be deemed "excellent" and "world class." "Top performers" cannot be identified--or emerge--without the ordinary others. Appreciation of the ordinary or mundane problematizes the managerial rhetoric of excellence (Readings, 1997) and turns attention to the purposes and internal goods of academic work in its diverse forms. It is another issue, if some of the researcher groups have actually been able to do prominent work because of prior success in renewing academic practices under favorable conditions (see Frickel & Gross, 2005).

4. Autonomous Renewal of Academic Work

The idea of academic praxis in emergence provides us with an alternative vocabulary and image to help us speak about academic work, one that differs clearly from the managerialist perspective and rhetoric. In order to make the foregoing abstract and conceptual ideas more concrete and contestable, I will elaborate on them in three ways: First, I will draw on our local experiences of autonomous developmental work. This opens up discussion on the ways in which academics can act in and on their local realities. Second, I will relate the ideas developed here to other works that have suggested similar approaches to studying academic work. These two steps will together offer further support to the argument that thinking in terms of academic praxis in emergence sustains hope rather than mere unproductive illusions. Third, I will consider some counterarguments against these ideas. While one may have reasons for hope, these counterpoints remind us of the reasons for despair that can shadow such positive outlooks.

4.1. Local Efforts

The basic and sustained motivation to approach academic work from these new angles came to me amid significant experiences in the 1990s. Now in retrospect, I can recall a short period in which I was individually approaching what I would call “good and meaningful work”--or praxis that integrates various activities. In this situation, I was able to bring together research, education, and expert tasks in a way that felt much better than my previous ways of working. To accomplish this I had to make several changes in my work: I moved to a new research area: developmental work in work organizations. I introduced this specialization into our curriculum by creating new courses that were based on new learning methods, namely cooperative learning, inquiry-based learning and action learning. I started to collaborate actively with professionals in this field, that is, with researcher-developers, and consultants. In the courses the students were researching professional practice in collaboration with their teachers. In the process they were not only learning about books but actually developing professionally relevant skills. In my expert roles I was doing research as well as acting as one of the professionals. I was learning not only new teaching methods, but also rehearsing a new set of research practices--participatory (action) research. I developed new ideas about how to arrange the practices of self-governance in the unit and tested them, for instance, when organizing meetings. Without support and collaboration from a number of colleagues all this would have been impossible: a key move for us was to collaborate more closely in teaching and research activities.

I thought and felt then that I am doing now what I ought to be doing. Even if this state lasted only for a short period, about 2 years, it left me with the conviction that one can purposefully modify academic practices for the better. This motivated a further move towards higher education research and, through a long process, led to writings like this one.

When I talk about our local efforts, I am referring to what about ten colleagues did and

accomplished in about 10 years since the mid 1990s. We all worked in the same subject-based unit and the interest spread gradually from just a couple of people to the bigger group of collaborators. Our efforts were not centrally coordinated by anybody and there were always several parallel projects going on. The head of the unit accepted our activism but he did not order or ask for it. Only a small part of these renewal activities has been documented in publications. I will present below only a few brief examples and summary points. Note that the previous activities were not guided by the conceptual framework we are currently developing and therefore I do not want to over-interpret or rationalize them in light of the newer ideas.

An example of one of the parallel projects concerns changing gendered practices in our own unit. Saija Katila and Susan Meriläinen, then doctoral students, set out to make unfair practices visible, talked and wrote about them, dealt with the aftermath, and in the end accomplished some changes that were acknowledged by relevant others. In a joint article we try to answer the question of why this was possible without destructive effects on their academic careers (Meriläinen, Räsänen, & Katila, in press). The answer can be summarized in the following way. The two like-minded women found each other and the joint interest; they received support for their effort from women working in other universities; they used feminisms and feminist research as intellectual resources; they chose a specific, symmetric approach to gender issues, assuming that both men and women contribute to the reproduction of--and possible changes in--the gendered practices. Some women and men collaborated in the developmental efforts and the work culture and the position of the unit supported deviant action. Moreover, it is notable that equality policies or higher education policies in Finland--and there were a number available--did not, in our view, directly aid or prevent the project at that time.

Some of the published accounts concern the renewal of teaching and learning practices. During the period, we created several new courses, revised old ones, and even redesigned the subject-specific program in management and organization. A key trigger for these developments was a course on cooperative learning, arranged by an outsider. I and some others realized during this course that there really exist alternative working practices for students and teachers and that we can learn them. Once we got started with the experimental courses and tried to document them, we were ready to search for further knowledge from the literature. And there was plenty of that available. Thereafter there was no lack of ideas and we helped each other in gaining the necessary skills through collaborative teaching. New, younger teachers were inducted to a range of teaching tasks while working alongside senior ones and the juniors were not treated as "teaching assistants" that do all the dirty work. One example of a new course, called Professional Development is reported in Räsänen and Korpiaho (2007). By the year 2005, we had advanced to the point that we felt able to ask students to reflect on their studying as practical--that is tactical, political, and moral--activity. We incorporated ideas from practice-based frameworks into the course's design and combined them with what we had learned from different working methods (see also Räsänen, 2007).

The examples above are not unique. Feminist researchers have reported on various change projects in academia and higher education researchers have reported on countless innovations in teaching and curriculum design. What may be less usual is the wide scope of developmental activities within a single academic unit. However, in the end we met barriers that seem to be all too familiar in universities, as they are in other organizations. The new ways of working did not move beyond the borders of the unit. This would have required active support from university-level actors (see, e.g., Gibbs, 2005, p. 4). Moreover, by the midpoint of the decade, a range of externally determined changes were forced upon our work and they sapped the energy and time needed in autonomous initiatives. The competences and ideas developed still exist, but there is now no space for activities that we would consider important. We are tactically experienced and morally awake, but we cannot act effectively in the current political situation: university managers have views on what should be accomplished and achieved in our academic activities that are just too different from our own. As it is likely that managers will continue to tighten their top-down control, we need to reconsider our goals and reposition our initiatives.

Finally, one crucial point about our local experiences: the members of the unit were never in the process on constructing one and the same academic praxis. We have reported elsewhere how we tried to identify different, alternative directions in which our colleagues individually or jointly searched for “integrative identities” (Räsänen & Mäntylä, 2001). We found four ways of relating with the basic activities: business academic, academic expert, concerned social scientist, and action researcher. Later on I added a fifth one to this list: feminist researcher (Räsänen, 2005). Those who were inclined towards the last three alternatives were most active in the renewal efforts, whereas the rest took either an indifferent or even a resistant stance towards the active developers and their hopes. We witnessed this diversity of interests within the borders of our formal unit.

These accounts from our unit can be read as attempts to articulate forms of praxis in emergence. In these dispersed and incomplete processes of emergence, academics draw on attractive ideals and revise a range of practices. They hope to accomplish a form of work that is meaningful and sustainable. Unfortunately we have not succeeded in these efforts to such an extent that we could characterize our own praxis. However, in a forthcoming article, I try to characterize the praxis constructed by a group of Belgian colleagues (Räsänen, in press). In particular, I identify the “internal goods” they are trying to realize in their work by reinterpreting how they organized an academic conference (cf. MacIntyre, 1981). According to the interpretation I offer, they highly value courage to speak out, relational sensitivity, aesthetic and embodied qualities of work, integration of activities, and self-reflexive and autonomous attempts at renewal.

4.2. Supporting Studies

There are other higher education researchers whose works support the above ideas. These studies either present a related, practice-based conceptualization of academic work and its various

dimensions or even suggest that academic work can evolve into a form that I call praxis. Moreover, the strong and many-sided stream of participatory research provides resources for research-based development work in academia. As a broader review is impracticable here, I present only brief notes on this literature.

While the most of the related work is being done on the margins of higher education research, there is one stream of thinking and university development that has grown into a prominent movement. This movement uses the term *scholarship of teaching and learning* to express its interest in “the integration of discovery, learning, and public engagement” (found on the Web, [International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning](#)). Although the movement’s primary concern is to improve the status and quality of teaching in universities, its proponents also search for ways to integrate the basic academic activities (Barnett, 2005; Boyer, 1990; cf. Kalleberg, 2000). The members of this movement have documented a large variety of experiments and innovations serving this purpose. Related ideas have also been presented in studies that discuss the nature of basic, discipline-based units as the sites for work that integrates the diverse university functions (e.g., Becher & Trowler, 2001). On the basis of these two lines of research one can argue that it is not necessarily unrealistic to hope for integrated forms of academic work.

Our three-dimensional conception of praxis may be specific, but the same basic ideas have been used and developed by many others. By the concept of praxis these researchers refer, with varying emphases, to committed action that is politically informed, morally motivated, or critical and transformative in respect to the conditions of action (e.g., Arciga Zavala, 2006; Boyce, 1996; Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 190; Fulton, n.d.). Moreover, the Aristotelian heritage highlights the importance of practice-based and situational wisdom (phronesis) in action (see Eikeland, 2006; Gibbs, Costley, Armsby, & Trakaki, 2007). Some higher education researchers draw on this kind of thinking in discussing “academic professionalism” (Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, 2002; Nixon, Marks, Rowland, & Walker, 2001). In particular, they ask for the redefinition of what this professionalism consists of and what the renewal of it means. They may focus explicitly on the moral perspective (Fielding, 1999), and elaborate McIntyre’s ideas in the university context (Nixon, 2004). Others have also carried out action research projects to advance new forms of “activist professionalism” (e.g., Walker, 2001; cf. Räsänen & Mäntylä, 2001).

When academics study their own work, with the intention of improving it and its conditions, it requires revisions in the conceptions and practices of research too. If the local or discipline-specific tradition demands that the researcher stays in a distanced, disinterested, and neutral position in respect to the research object, the move to studying academic work and one’s own workplace is surely difficult. Fortunately, intellectual resources that are available in different streams of participatory and engaged research can help in this transition (see, e.g., Reason & Bradbury, 2001). A recent development is that the practitioners of participatory research are

trying the figure out how practice-theoretical ideas will improve their research practice (Kemmis, in press). We are not alone in this long-term project.

The literatures, ideas, and efforts mentioned above are surely more easily accessible to those who work in the social sciences or humanities. Within these fields we can further locate disciplines in which participatory research and developmental work are legitimate parts of the research and educational agenda. For instance, we were readily able to make them elements of our own teaching and research activities. The situation may be quite different in other fields. The leap required may be much further for a natural scientist and she or he may benefit from collaborators from other disciplines.

4.3. Mission Impossible?

The construction of a new form of academic work from within can be imagined and it is possible to find accounts of such efforts, but without doubt this is a demanding vision and mission. It is important to discuss openly arguments against this line of thinking and action. There are several grounds for such arguments. The prevailing dominance of a managerial form of governance is only one of them. Other bases can be found in the individualistic heritage in academic cultures, postmodernist positions, and paradoxically, in Alasdair MacIntyre's views on education.

The idea of academic praxis can be deemed to be an idealistic fantasy, because the current conditions appear to prevent any autonomous efforts at renewal. Current policies implemented locally by university managers favor individualistic efforts, mutual rivalry, instrumental use of "human resources," and performativity. Those who work on their own conception of academic work and try to defend it against the political trends and trendsetters are positioned to lose the game. It is only a romantic fantasy that academic professionals could retain their autonomy and resist recolonization and normalization. A political realist would abandon this fantasy and make the best out of the colonial, unfair world.

Another, very practical reason to doubt the possibility of rehearsing academic praxis concerns its collective nature. Like Maaret Wager (2000) has shown, the academic tradition revolves around the discourse of "I am different." A "true academic" would want to think of oneself as different from both the "laypeople" and other academics. Any collective project would be a threat to one's freedom to be different. One would rather suffer from social isolation and emotional loneliness, and stay politically passive. The idea of collective praxis would be absurd to those who willfully withdraw from social presence.

Third, the whole idea of academic praxis can be understood as a modernist search for progress, unity, and self-governance. In the current poststructurally conceived world, it is not sensible to search for a set of "goods" that would define a meaningful social practice. Fragmentation, multiple and incongruent realities, constant flow of new frames of interpretation, and dispersed

and fluid identities are here to stay. Managers call this “flexibility.” Those academics who cannot accept this should aim at other jobs or early retirement. Turning into a supporter of this diagnosis makes life bearable and even exciting.

The foregoing three arguments against the praxis mission may be present in our everyday endeavors and ponderings. They can be understood as alternative survival or adaptation strategies to cope with the seemingly impossible situations in “total institutions” (see Goffman, 1990; cf. Räsänen, 1998). Any ordinary academic may consider or practice them as alternatives to resistance and autonomous action: accepting and utilizing recolonization to one’s own advantage, social withdrawal, or conversion to embrace current conditions and diagnoses of our weaknesses (see also Mäntylä, 2000).

However, the claims that all academics cannot but choose between the three survival strategies and that universities are total institutions governed by a perfect managerial discipline are hardly sustainable. Experiences and working conditions may vary, but there is a host of research evidence in higher education research that contradicts such claims. Moreover, we would underestimate ourselves and our colleagues, if we claimed that we have all given up and lost our potential for creative, self-determined, and cooperative action. This would be an extremely pessimistic outlook indeed.

In fact, the most serious challenge to the praxis mission comes from another direction. Paradoxically, it can be formulated by using Alasdair MacIntyre’s terminology, especially his distinction between social practice and institution. His argument is based on the view that social practices as specific forms of life can be defined independently from the institutions that support them.

According to MacIntyre (1981, chap. 14), an institution (e.g., a university) is needed to support a practice, but the internal goods of the practice and the virtues needed in realizing them (e.g., open and honest communication) are not necessarily respected or nurtured by the institution. Institutions are established and funded to realize specific external goods (like the competitiveness of the university’s business partners). The maintenance of the practice would thus require ensuring a critical distance from the demands of the institution and protecting the practice from undue institutional pressures.

The question is how we can know “what we should be about” (Reynolds & Tyler, 2001) without recourse to institutional definitions and determinations of academic work. In other words, what do we and others mean by the term academic work, and how can we find an answer to this question? A crucial example of this problem is the five-fold categorization of university activities that I have used in this text: research, education, external services, public debate, and the governance of these activities (see Kalleberg, 2000). This list captures the bundle of activities found in today’s universities.

A higher education researcher can argue that the bundle of university tasks has no grounding in any form of academic praxis. The set of tasks is a historical result of political struggles and negotiations in which academics have not necessarily been able to realize their interests. In the “corporate universities,” it is the managers and the authorities to which they report (e.g., accrediting organizations) who come to define what is acceptable academic work. Following this line of reasoning, it is not even desirable to aim at making a sensible whole of the various activities: the project is self-contradictory and determined by diverse, nonacademic interests. If we take this argument seriously, then we should give up trying to integrate the various activities into a specific praxis. Or, can there be any praxis and a set of internal goods and respective virtues, in any field, that could provide the moral basis for the combination of these activities, or even a subset of them? My guess is that MacIntyre himself would answer “no” to this question.

The skeptical attitude towards modern institutions may tell not only about MacIntyre’s own survival or success strategies in academia, but also of a more general uncertainty concerning the purposes of academic work. An indication of this uncertainty is the debate that emerged when MacIntyre remarked that teaching is not a practice in itself (MacIntyre & Dunne, 2002). While his point was that academic practices should be understood in terms of disciplinary traditions, like history and mathematics, and that teaching only serves each of them, several philosophers of education contested the claim (see the special issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Dunne & Hogan, 2003). For some of them, education can be a practice in itself. This debate reminds us of the need to be mindful of how academic work with its multiple activities is constituted, especially if we step away from the institutional definitions.

MacIntyre’s basic strategy is to turn to history and traditions for answers to moral questions. He is skeptical and pessimistic in respect to the modern world. However, this is not a constructive option for those who want to renew academic work in current conditions. Recognition of local and disciplinary traditions may be key to prudent and morally motivated action, but it has to be complemented by a quest focused on what is valuable in academic work today and tomorrow. The outcomes of such quests are likely to vary across different groups of academics, academic units, universities, disciplines, and geographical locations. Therefore the quests for the “sources of good” (Taylor, 1989) proceed mainly by moral conversations in local networks. Nevertheless, such transdisciplinary and international forums as the *Journal of Research Practice* also have a role to play in inspiring and justifying local reflection and action.

5. Conclusion

The managerial form of university governance has changed the conditions of academic work in many countries. While some academics consider this a welcome development, others experience it as threat to their autonomy and to the meaningfulness of their work. This essay suggests such a basic stance relevant to the current conditions that should serve especially the latter group of academics. I claim that by approaching academic work as a potential praxis in emergence, it is easier to appreciate local, autonomous activity in renewing academic work. Even if such efforts

remain difficult, dispersed in space, discontinuous in time, and incomplete, they may still provide a sense of direction and keep up hope. The conception of praxis is a way of saying what the mission of such efforts is, and simultaneously, it is a way of defining an epistemic object for research on academic work.

In constructing this approach to academic work, we have drawn on higher education research and theories of practice. The former has a lot to offer to academics who struggle with the ongoing changes, but in my view this literature is too bound up with a bipolar political setting: either you celebrate managerialism and solve its implementation problems or you criticize it without any alternative constructive agenda and action. Practice-based theories can be used as resources in overcoming the paralysis by critique, because they highlight the potential in practitioners' own knowledge, competence, and action. We, as university employees are practitioners in academic work, and our accounts of the tactics, politics, and morals of academic work deserve to be taken seriously--both by us ourselves and by relevant others.

I have illustrated the abstract idea of praxis by sharing experiences from renewal efforts based on participatory research. My tempered optimism is based on these experiences and on similar stories from other universities. However, the conditions, methods, and goals of local activism can vary across contexts. The emergence of a new academic praxis cannot be modelled in a normative sense, but it is possible to enrich the vocabulary by which we can describe academic work and attempts to improve it. Accounts of such developmental work from academics in different fields--both ordinary and distinguished--would complement and contest the managerial story about academic work.

Acknowledgments

Comments from participants in the following conferences helped in developing this paper: 18th Annual Conference of The Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER), Jyväskylä, Finland (September 1-3, 2005) and 4th International Conference on Researching Work and Learning, Sydney, Australia (December 11-14, 2005). I am also thankful for the comments from Chris Trevitt, two anonymous reviewers, JRP coeditor D. P. Dash, and the MERI group members (http://www.hse.fi/en/research/t/p_4/meri). A grant from The Academy of Finland during 2005-2006 (No. 108645) aided in writing this article.

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Received 21 November 2006

Accepted 6 August 2007

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